



Protecting the idyll but not the environment: Second homes, amenity migration and rural exclusion in Washington State

Michelle C. Kondo^{a,*}, Rebeca Rivera^b, Stan Rullman Jr.^c

^a Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Program in Urban Design and Planning, University of Washington, Box 355740, Seattle, WA 98195, USA

^b Department of Anthropology, University of Washington, Box 353100, Seattle, WA 98195, USA

^c School of Environmental and Forest Sciences, University of Washington, Box 352100, Seattle, WA 98195, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 May 2011

Received in revised form 28 February 2012

Accepted 3 March 2012

Available online 30 March 2012

Keywords:

Amenity migration

Second homes

Mixed-method research

ABSTRACT

Researchers are beginning to take notice of amenity migration processes and their impacts in exurban areas of the U.S. Our research explores second-home owners as contributors to processes of amenity migration. Using a mixed-method approach combining spatial data and interview analyses, we investigate both the structural and behavioral aspects of amenity migration in San Juan and Okanogan counties of Washington State. Results indicate that second-home owners' desire for privacy and escape is reflected in patterns of spatial isolation among second homes in the study area. These patterns have potentially significant ecological effects. Second-home owners also seek to protect their investments by supporting regulations which support their version of a rural idyll. Therefore, policy-makers should be wary of strategies to promote regulations which promote aesthetic rather than social and ecological function.

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1. Introduction

Exurbia, a development typology characterized by “very-low-density, amenity-seeking...residential settlement in rural areas” (Taylor, 2009, 324), is becoming common in the United States and beyond. It is occurring in post-productivist rural landscapes, in which economies center around the production and consumption of “experiences” (Hines, 2011, 2; Taylor, 2009). In fact, the conversion of agricultural, forested, and other previously undeveloped land to low-density residential construction was found to be the main form of land development in the U.S. in 2005 (Brown, Johnson, Loveland, & Theobald, 2005; Theobald, 2001, 2005). Despite economic recession, this type of development has continued its expansion in some parts of the U.S. (Hutyra, Yoon, Hepinstall-Cymerman, & Alberti, 2011; Wheeler & Beebe, 2011). Nationally, exurban areas occupy as much land as urban areas (Clark, McChesney, Munroe, & Irwin, 2009). But because exurbanization is often not guided by comprehensive growth management plans and because this type of development can have profound ecological, economic, and social consequences, its unchecked expansion is causing concern.

Amenity migration refers to “the purchasing of primary or second residences in rural areas valued for their aesthetic, recreational, and other consumption-orientated use values” (McCarthy, 2008, 2). It is a key driver of exurban development in rural areas across the U.S. (McGranahan, 1999; Rasker & Hansen, 2000); this phenomenon has also been observed and studied in the U.K. (Boyle & Halfacree, 1998) and Australia (Gurran & Blakely, 2007). It has been shown that the desire to migrate to non-metropolitan areas is correlated with increased age (Wilson, 1988), so to that extent that retirement funds remain despite the recent economic recession, more conversion of amenity-rich land into residential communities could occur over the next two decades (Hansen et al., 2002; Stynes, Zheng, & Stewart, 1997).

A significant factor in exurban growth is the development of occasional-use, vacation, seasonal, or second properties (hereafter referred to as second homes) (Hall & Müller, 2004; Luka, 2010; McIntyre, Williams, & McHugh, 2006). This paper builds on previous studies that recognize the contribution of second homes to exurban growth. Second homes have played a large role in bringing suburban-scale development to exurban areas (Luka, 2010). Nationally, second homes represent roughly 50% of total homes in outdoor recreation areas (Woodward & Damon, 2001). In rural areas of Washington State, second homes represent as many as 36% of all homes at the county level and as many as 98% of homes at the census tract level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). It is important to understand the dynamics of second-home construction, not only because of the impacts on the land, but also because second-home owners are increasingly influential in land use and planning decisions in rural areas (Clendenning, Field, & Kapp, 2005).

* Corresponding author. Present address: School of Social Policy & Practice, University of Pennsylvania, 3701 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA. Tel.: +1 215 746 4028; fax: +1 215 573 2099.

E-mail addresses: mkondo@sp2.upenn.edu (M.C. Kondo), rebeca@u.washington.edu (R. Rivera), srullman@u.washington.edu (S. Rullman Jr.).

As a point of entry, this study focuses on amenity migration patterns and second-home development in Washington State, a place that is experiencing exurban growth. In the Seattle Metropolitan Area, transition of forested areas to low-density development is the predominant mode of land conversion (Hutyra et al., 2011; Robinson, Newell, & Marzluff, 2005). Yet few previous studies have addressed amenity migration and second home development in the Pacific Northwest (notable exceptions include Charnley, McLain, & Donoghue, 2008; Rudzitis & Streatfeild, 1993). Most existing studies have sought to quantitatively characterize exurbia as a spatial typology or assess its environmental impact (Beyers & Nelson, 2000; Hansen et al., 2002; McGranahan, 1999). In contrast, we investigate the structural and behavioral aspects of amenity migration using qualitative and spatial analysis.

Our findings are twofold. First, second-home owners are motivated in large part by a desire to be geographically isolated in an amenity-rich environment, which contributes to specific land use patterns and spatial distributions. Compared to primary homes, second homes are more often located in spatially remote areas of high ecological sensitivity. Second, second-home owners tend to support the use of regulations to restrict broader access, prevent future development, and protect their image of the rural idyll. Landscape planners in these amenity migration areas should be wary of promoting policies which primarily support newcomers' vision of the rural idyll at the potential cost of social and ecological health of existing communities and landscapes.

2. Amenity migration

People move to rural areas for both economic and non-economic reasons. In the case of amenity migrants, studies have shown that non-economic “drivers” or “pull factors” are paramount (Marcouiller, Clendenning, & Kedzior, 2002; McGranahan, 1999; Rudzitis, 1999). Natural amenities such as water bodies, temperate summers, warm winters, topographic variation, wilderness, and outdoor recreation all increase the attractiveness of rural areas for business and residential development (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011; Hansen et al., 2002; McGranahan, 1999, 2008). Social and cultural factors can also be draws to rural areas (Beyers & Nelson, 2000). In North America, second homes are a common occurrence in ski towns, coastal areas, rural and inland hill or mountain areas (Nepal & Jamal, 2011).

The class dimensions of rural in-migration, and the notion of rural gentrification, have been explored largely in the U.K. (Phillips, 1993, 2004; Smith & Phillips, 2001), but also applied in the U.S. (Darling, 2005; Ghose, 2004; Hines, 2011). Studies of exurbanization and rural gentrification have exposed processes of production and protection of a rural idyll that involve aspects of the natural environment among rural in-migrants (Cadieux, 2011; Halfacree, 1995; Smith & Phillips, 2001). For example, in Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire, England, Smith and Phillips (2001) found in-migrants were motivated by a desire for green residential space. In the state of Texas, Friedberger (1996) found that rural gentrification was driven in part by migrants' interest in equestrianism and livestock raising as hobbies. Studies of the Rocky Mountain West have found the image of “the frontier” (Hines, 2007) plays a strong role in rural gentrification.

Conflicts over control and ownership of the landscape can arise between long-time residents who have a historical resource-extraction interest in the natural environment and in-migrants who value preservation of an idealized or mythical rural aesthetic (Charnley et al., 2008; Walker & Fortmann, 2003). Increasingly, in-migrants are using their collective power to enforce their cultural preferences and protect their investments by influencing local policy decisions (Buller & Lowe, 1990; Cloke & Thrift, 1987;

Ghose, 2004; Hines, 2010; Sandberg & Wekerle, 2010). For example, Ghose's (2004) study of rural gentrification in Missoula, Montana, showed that newcomers became involved in local politics to push more restrictive land use regulations to protect their real estate investments and preserve the rural character of their new homes. Sandberg and Wekerle (2010) described rural and exurban gentrification in the Oak Ridges Moraine of Ontario, Canada, as a form of “neoliberalization of nature.” In-migrants supported legislation that essentially aestheticized the landscape, which served to promote class privilege.

Studies have shown that affluent residents in amenity-rich rural areas often believe they are better able to protect natural resources than the long-term residents who have participated in traditional resource-extraction economies (Hansen et al., 2002; Hunter, Boardman, & Saint Onge, 2005; Smith & Krannich, 2000). Newcomers from urban areas tend to be more supportive of preservation-focused management of public lands (Beyers & Nelson, 2000; Hansen et al., 2002; Rudzitis, 1999), and tend to be attracted to areas with existing environmental protection policies (Charnley et al., 2008). In a survey of high-amenity counties in the rural West, Rudzitis (1999) found that in-migrants more strongly valued protection of federal lands than long-time residents. In a study of areas in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem, Hansen et al. (2002) found that participants in outdoor recreation and technology economies more closely aligned themselves with a philosophy of environmental conservation than participants in traditional extraction-based economies.

Exurban development in the U.S. is occurring at higher than average rates near ecologically sensitive areas (Frentz, Farmer, Guldin, & Smith, 2004; Hansen et al., 2002; Knight, Wallace, & Riebsame, 1995; Marzluff & Bradley, 2003; Riebsame, Gosnell, & Theobald, 1996; Schnaiberg, Riera, Turner, & Voss, 2002; Theobald, Gosnell, & Riebsame, 1996). Exurban residential development means more homes, roads, and other infrastructure. Low-density, large-lot residential construction increases impervious surface area, water and resource consumption, and contamination (Arnold & Gibbons, 1996). For example, septic systems can be a major source of nitrogen contamination in surface water (Shields et al., 2008). Road networks fragment and reduce habitat and wildlife populations, increase noise and associated stress in wildlife, decrease native biodiversity, and introduce non-native plant species (Forman & Alexander, 1998).

3. Introduction to the study area

The population of Washington State has grown rapidly over the last three decades. It is one of the 12 fastest growing states in the U.S. Washington has 29 nonmetropolitan counties (counties without urban municipalities with more than 50,000 people). Between 2000 and 2010, Washington's nonmetropolitan population grew by 15.3%, and the number of second homes increased by 45.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2010). In 2010, seasonal homes constituted an average of 17% of all homes in these counties, and a maximum of 36% (San Juan County). At the census tract level (Skamania County), second homes were as many as 98% of homes.

Despite an in-depth literature on amenity migration in the West and the New West, the phenomena of amenity migration to exurban areas of the Pacific Northwest remains under explored. Previous studies have shown that the transition of forested areas to low-density development is the predominant mode of land conversion in the Seattle Metropolitan Area (Hutyra et al., 2011; Robinson, Newell, & Marzluff, 2005). Hutyra et al. (2011) found that between 1986 and 2007, low-density urban development (between 20 and 50% impervious surface lot coverage) increased from 7.0% to 14.6%,

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